



ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY

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FACT SHEET

NOVEMBER 2021

The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier: Mall and Roosevelt Fountain

The original Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, dedicated with the burial of the World War I Unknown Soldier on November 11, 1921, was a simple, low-lying flat structure. There was not enough time to finish constructing the Tomb before the Unknown's 1921 burial ceremony, and the structure remained incomplete for over a decade. The sarcophagus that you see today, as well as the marble staircase and grand, landscaped mall, were not completed until April 1932.

The process of completing the Tomb—already a revered site visited by thousands of mourners each year—incited vigorous debates during the early 1920s. Originally, the U.S. government had given Thomas Hastings, the architect of Memorial Amphitheater, the responsibility for designing the Tomb. Hastings created the temporary tomb installed for the 1921 burial, and afterward, he worked tirelessly to complete the site. Hastings initially envisioned the Tomb as a tall, elaborately carved monument. Although the federal Commission of Fine Arts supported Hastings's vision, the War Department opposed his ornate design and decided to look for other options.

In 1926, Congress authorized an open design competition to complete the Tomb. After several phases of review, it awarded the design to architect Lorimer Rich (buried in Section 48) and sculptor Thomas Hudson Jones, both World War I veterans. Simple and symbolic, their design featured a flat sarcophagus inscribed with carvings of wreaths and three neoclassical figures representing Peace, Victory and Valor.

Rich and Jones also reimagined the landscape around the Tomb as a more ceremonial space, with a stately paved granite plaza between the Tomb and Memorial Amphitheater. East of this terrace, a monumental staircase led to a tapered grass mall lined by 22-foot-high clipped American beech hedges. This mall crossed the proposed cemetery road (what is today Roosevelt Drive) and terminated with another plaza featuring a granite fountain—now called the Roosevelt Fountain. The fountain is set into an approximately 2' deep recessed circular pool, with a bronze spout at the center; the spout is cast with decorative foliage. To the east of the fountain plaza, granite steps lead to a lower plaza and a walkway with five granite benches.

Construction began in August 1931, and the new approach to the Tomb was finished by November 11, 1931, when President Herbert Hoover and First Lady Lou Hoover visited the site for Armistice Day. The Tomb sarcophagus itself was unveiled on April 9, 1932.

The Arlington National Cemetery conservation team conducts routine preservation maintenance of the Tomb Plaza and Roosevelt Fountain, most recently in 2020-2021 in preparation for the Tomb centennial.